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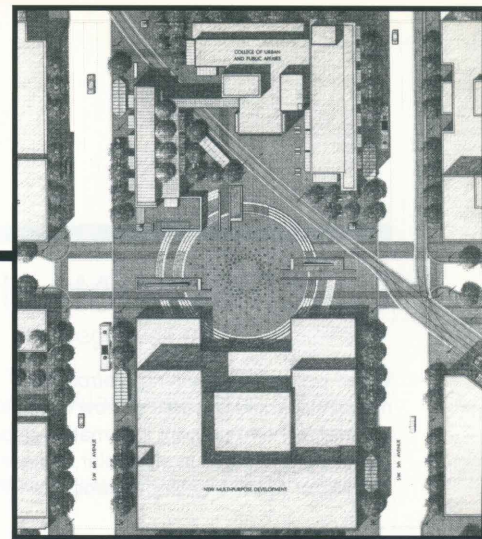
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The Landscape

The Urban Center Plaza

By Carl Abbott



Landscape design by Walker Macy Landscape Architects. Rendering courtesy of Walker Macy.

The Urban Center Plaza shares one of downtown Portland's 200-square-foot blocks with Portland State University's new Urban Center building and attached distance education wing and extends across a vacated street right-of-way to the south. The plaza and building, which houses the university's College of Urban and Public Affairs, are the newest of and standard-setting components of a University District plan to link the 23,000-student university to the thriving core of Portland. They open the campus to the city within ten blocks of the city center. The plaza's designer, Doug Macy of Walker Macy, the Portland-based landscape architecture and urban design firm, lists its functions: a forecourt to the Urban Center, "an inviting front door" for Portland State, and a gateway for Portlanders entering their downtown from the south.

Downtown Portland is elongated north and south between the Willamette river and a freeway. The plaza is ten blocks – and ten minutes – from Pioneer Courthouse Square at the heart of the city, and six blocks from the performing arts center and Portland Art Museum. It defines a downtown subdistrict and the southern end of downtown itself.

Adding the square footage and the plaza cost roughly \$5-million. The bulk of the funds came from the Portland Development Commission, supplemented by a Federal transportation Administration grant to Tri-Met, the regional transit agency. Tri-Met managed the construction in coordination with bus facility improvements on Fifth and Sixth Avenues (the university is the single most active destination in the Tri-Met system).

The touchstone for civic spaces in Portland is busy Pioneer Courthouse Square, created in the 1980s to replace a parking ramp in the heart of the shopping district. In many ways, the new plaza is a reverse image of the square, which Walker Macy helped to design. The square creates an urban amphitheater by cutting a circle into a concave set of stairs and steps. The Urban Center Plaza thrusts a circle of stairs and

stadium steps into the heart of the space. In effect, says PSU architect Burt Ewart, it is Pioneer Courthouse Square "turned inside out."

The difference extends to use as well as form. Although the plaza's 30,000 square feet of paved area is roughly the same as Pioneer Courthouse Square, they have different purposes. The square is a focal point for the whole city, while the plaza is an amenity for the nascent neighborhood of new retail and housing. The downtown space is designed for hanging out. The plaza is intended to lead students and visitors in and out of the campus.

The fountains of the plaza key off of Portland's natural setting and act as signposts that help to call attention to the major pedestrian corridors. One ripples gently over low baffles like a Columbia River fish ladder. The others channel water into narrow streams that surge over escarpments like the waterfalls that plunge from the 2,000-foot bluffs of the Columbia Gorge in Portland's immediate environs.

Londoner John Aiken's monumental sculpture speaks of mountains. Two head-high monoliths guard the entrances to the Urban Center. Stone ellipses of light granite are set into the brick pavement to suggest shadows stretched twenty to forty feet across the brickwork of the plaza. Together these elements recognize the "hugeness of nature" that surrounds Portland, to quote the artist – lava flows, fault lines, glaciers.

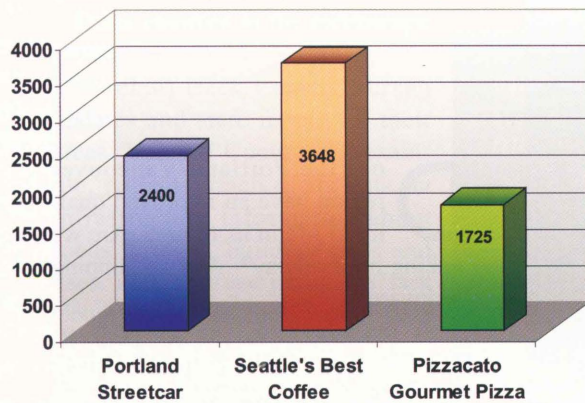
Will the plaza fulfill Macy's vision as a "crossroads of movement, a coming together and mixing of the diverse aspects of Portland State University"? The informality of the plaza with its many subareas and alternative use routes suggests that regular use will be constant but small scale--a quick spot for a slice of pizza, twenty minutes reading in the sun, five minutes of chatting on one of the fountain parapets. And that may be just what is needed for a campus in a bustling city.

Excerpted from "Landscape Architecture" magazine, February, 2001.



Urban Plaza Commerce

Average Number of Weekly Customer Transactions at Plaza businesses



Sources: Portland Streetcar, Seattle's Best, Pizzacato